

"A Two-sided Sign"
Genesis 9:8-17

July 29, 2018

10th Sunday After Pentecost

Once there were two small towns, Mayville and Fairbury, separated by thirty miles and connected by a country road. Halfway between them was a sign. If you were traveling from Mayville to Fairbury, the sign said "Fairbury: 15 miles." However, if you were traveling from Fairbury to Mayville, the other side of the sign said, "Mayville: 15 miles." The funny thing was that people who lived in Fairbury always referred to it as the "Mayville sign." But the people who lived in Mayville always called it the "Fairbury sign." How could there be two different perceptions, but one sign? It all depended upon which way you saw the sign. Our text for today is about a sign that can be seen in several ways, the sign of the rainbow.

One of the most beautiful events we can see in the heavens is the rainbow. Many would see no meaning in a rainbow, but simply as a natural phenomenon caused when the right meteorological conditions following a rain are met. Many people would see it having no other purpose than simply being beautiful and neat.

Unfortunately, the rainbow has also been co-opted by various political groups to support various political and moral positions. They may actually see the rainbow as a sign which has meaning, but not in the sense in which God gave it.

In our text today from Genesis, we read about the origin of the rainbow and its God-given meaning as a sign. It takes place shortly after Noah, his family, and all of the animals got off the ark. Now, lest we sentimentalize that story too much (as many children's books on the subject do), we have to remember why they had gotten on the ark in the first place. A couple of chapters prior to our text, the Word of God says, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.'" (Genesis 6:5-7) So, God cursed the world and sent a flood to destroy every living creature – the birds in the air, the animals that crept on the ground, and humanity, the crown jewel of God's creation who was made in His image – except for Noah and his family who had faith in Him.

Recently, we have seen accounts of great flooding in our nation and even in our state. There has been great damage caused by the severe floods. However, none of them even compares with this flood. All of our present day floods our local where the water rises up a comparatively short distance. This flood was worldwide and brought water the tops of every mountain in the world. It didn't just damage things as modern floods do. It destroyed everything. It wasn't a matter of a few people losing their lives unexpectedly due to the flood. It was the death of all of humanity, except for the family of Noah, as a deliberate act of God. God cursed the world through this flood and all humanity died. The flood reminds us that the anger of God is fierce and frightening as this incident shows.

Immediately after Noah and his family got off the ark, he built an altar to the Lord and presented a sacrifice to the Lord. The Lord was pleased and said, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, but the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." (Genesis 8:21-22)

In other words, people would remain the same. People would be conceived and born in sin and would commit sin all of their lives. They were this way before the flood. They would remain this way after the flood. However, God's strategy in dealing with sinners would not remain the same. Rather than curse humanity for their sinfulness, God would reconcile sinners to Himself. Instead of punishing people as they deserved, God would show mercy and forgive sin through sacrifice.

I'm sure these words were of great comfort to Noah and his family. However, imagine how it would have been if the Lord stopped right there. Imagine how Noah and his family would feel if they committed some sort of sin and, all of a sudden, the clouds got dark and it started to rain. I think they would've been terrified.

So, in our text for today, God establishes a covenant with Noah, his family, and with every living creature on earth – the birds, the livestock, and every beast that exists. The word, "covenant", sounds like some sort of negotiating went on and a mutual agreement was arrived at so there was peace between the two conflicting parties. However, when God makes a covenant with people, God does everything. People can do nothing. It is, in effect, a unilateral action by God in which He makes and fulfills promises. People merely receive them by faith.

So, in this instance, God not only promises never to destroy all life on earth through the waters of the flood, He also promises a sign of the covenant – something visible – which people could see and know that the promise is true. He says, "I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh." (Genesis 9:13-15)

What great assurance this must've been! When the people felt the guilt of their sin and became worried about God punishing them and destroying the earth, all they had to do was look at the sky and see the rainbow. They would be reminded of God's promise of forgiveness and restoration, rather than anger and punishment. And, what's even more important, God would see the bow and not pour out his wrath upon the earth.

But, like the road sign in my opening illustration, there are two sides to this sign of the rainbow. The people would see the rainbow, trust in God's mercy, and receive His forgiveness. But, they would also be reminded by the rain which had fallen why the rainbow was necessary in the first place. They would be reminded of God's wrath shown in the worldwide flood and remember to take sin seriously as a result.

Wouldn't it be nice to have such a visible sign of our salvation? It would make believing in God and trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ so much easier if we could be sure that God will show us mercy and forgive us rather than pouring out his wrath and destroying us. The good news is we do have such a sign and I think all of you know what it is: the cross.

Like with the rainbow, there are many wrong interpretations of the cross. Many people see the cross is simply being a religious symbol or a good luck charm. Others see it as decoration or jewelry without any meaning. Thirty-five years ago, I was a new pastor just out of seminary and ministering in a deaf congregation. We served the students of the Wisconsin School for the Deaf. One Wednesday evening, Michelle came to our confirmation class for the 1st time. She was wearing a big cross on one of her years. Being naïve and overly optimistic, I assumed she had a faith background so I asked, "Michelle, what you have the cross?" She responded, "Because Madonna has one."

I heard another story from a pastor who had a member that worked in a jewelry store. A young lady came in and was looking at the various religious jewelry. She told this member

that she wanted a cross. Wanting to make sure that she understood the order correctly, the member asked, "Do you want to cross or a crucifix?" The young lady excitedly responded, "oh, I want one with the little guy on it."

The cross is more than a symbol or a piece of jewelry. It is the rainbow for New Testament people. In other words, it is a sign. But what is it a sign of?

The issue of sin today is the same as it was in the time of Noah. The Lord is holy and hates sin. His righteous anger requires him to destroy sin. However, the destruction at the time of Noah, as horrible and complete as it was, was only the destruction of life on the earth. The destruction which faces humanity today is the destruction of every person in hell forever.

Like in the time after the flood, the Lord doesn't destroy sinners. Instead, the Lord shows mercy to those who sin by doing evil or by failing to do good in violating the perfect law of God. The major difference is that the price for the salvation of humanity from eternity in hell is much higher than the salvation of humanity from death here on earth. Noah offered animal sacrifices as a sign of the covenant (the promise of God) and also as a sign of the perfect sacrifice which would be made once and for all by God Himself. God would offer the sacrifice of His Son to begin a new covenant with humanity. The sinless Son of God would offer His life and die, both physically here and spiritually in hell, to gain forgiveness for all of our sin and, by His resurrection from the dead, give us new life with Him that begins now and last forever in heaven.

The sign of this sacrifice and this covenant would not be something as beautiful and attractive as a rainbow. The sign of God's perfect sacrifice would be a cross - something ugly and repulsive. The cross was the most horrible method of execution ever inflicted by man upon other men. Yet the cross and the death of the Son of God upon the cross would be the sign that God accepted Jesus' sacrifice for sin, had reconciled world to Himself, forgiven us all of our sins, and would bring us all to heaven to be with Him forever.

Now, when God has every right to be angry and destroy sin and the sinners who perpetuate it, He sees the cross, remembers His covenant, and forgives us. He raised Jesus from the dead as a sign of His acceptance and is a promise of eternal life.

Like with Noah and his family, the cross is also something for us to see like they saw the rainbow. When we look at the cross, we see no mere artwork, good luck charm, or beautiful jewelry. Instead, we see the proof and guarantee of our forgiveness and our salvation. When you feel the guilt of your sin, the fear of death, and the uncertainty of the life which is to come, look at the cross of Jesus Christ. Know that your sins have been forgiven. Rejoice that He is conquered death. Be certain that you will live with Him in heaven forever.

This sign also has another side. As Noah and his family could see the rainbow and remember the rain which God sent in the great flood to destroy the earth, we, too, can look at the cross and remember God's anger against, punishment for, and judgment of sin. Just as you cannot have rainbows without rain, you cannot have forgiveness, resurrection, and life without suffering and death. The cross reminds us of the severity of God's judgment and calls us to take sin seriously. If God was angry enough to kill His only Son upon the cross and that the cross is only the tip of the iceberg of judgment (hell being the remainder of it), how dreadful the full and final judgment will be. It reminds us of what is waiting for those who do not repent, turn from their sin, and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Instead of looking for the assurance of God's mercy, the certainty of God's forgiveness, and the guarantee of God's eternal life in how good we live or how saved we feel, let us look to the signs which God has given to us to assure us, give us certainty, and guarantee all of His blessings to us.

The sign of Noah's time remains today. So, when you see a rainbow, do not let the first thought be of its beauty, its size, or whether there is a pot of gold at the end of it. Instead look at the rainbow, especially when we're facing the danger of floods, and realize that God will never again display His wrath by destroying all of the earth. May that give you comfort and assurance when the things of this life are going poorly.

Even more importantly, when you see a cross in a painting, in the church, or in a piece of jewelry around your neck, rejoice greatly, especially if the cross is "one with the little guy on it". See it and know that all of your sins, no matter how many and no matter how heinous, have been fully and completely forgiven for the sake of the sacrifice which took place on the cross. Know and believe that you are at peace with God and are shielded by Jesus from His wrath and punishment. Believe and be confident that you have life in heaven waiting for you by the resurrection of the One who died on the cross.

But see also the other side of the sign. Realize that sin is not merely a character flaw, nor is it simply "inappropriate choices". As the Lenten hymn, "Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted" says of the cross, "Ye who think of sin but lightly nor suppose the evil great; Here may view its nature rightly, Here it's guilt may estimate." Sin is serious. Sin is huge. Never take it lightly. Forgiveness is always given that you might "go and sin no more", not that you may sin more with no consequences.

Due to many strict laws about highway signs, you will likely never see a two-sided traffic sign (except in a clever sermon illustration crafted by your pastor). However, you will see a two-sided spiritual sign every time you see a rainbow and every time you see a cross. Rather than simply being items of beauty or decoration, they are signs (not mere symbols) of God's mercy for the world, His personal love for you, and His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Take them, but not for granted. Receive them and rejoice. But also remember and repent. Will you live a life of joyful confidence? See the sign and be sure. Amen.